

## AMDO TIBETAN TONGUE TWISTERS

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### ABSTRACT

Tibetan tongue twisters are a distinctive and significant part of Tibetan oral folk literature. They are made up of words and phrases related to what people see and experience in daily life. These words are strung together and are difficult to articulate rapidly and fluently, often because of a succession of questions and/ or similar consonantal sounds. This article sheds light on this poorly studied, vanishing, aspect of Tibetan tradition by focusing on tongue twisters that were once popular in Pha bzhi (Hayu 哈玉), a subdivision of Skya rgya (Jiajia 贾加) Administrative Village, Skya rgya Township, Gcan tsha (Jianzha 尖扎) County, Rma lho (Huangnan 黄南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai 青海) Province, PR China.

### KEY WORDS

Tibetan tongue twisters, Tibetan language, oral tradition, Pha bzhi

## INTRODUCTION

Tibetan tongue twisters as a living, generationally transmitted tradition, are on the verge of extinction. The common use of tongue twisters among many ordinary Tibetans swiftly declined in the 1980s as China's rapid modernization began powerfully affecting rural Tibetan areas in the form of household ownership of televisions, radios, and VCD/ DVD machines. Subsequently, these unique folklore forms that had been passed down through many generations and expressed in very specific, local forms lost their allure in just a decade and now have either vanished, or soon will, in most Tibetan areas of China.

An internet Google search done 18 May 2007 for 'Tibetan tongue twister' obtained three hits, all of which alluded to the same phrase—'Tibetan tongue twister'—to mean irrelevant and obscure information.<sup>1</sup> While this search was done in English, we were unable to find a single example of a published Tibetan tongue twister. Sa gong dbang 'dus (2003), Gzungs 'bum thar (2004), Rgyang 'khor tshe phun (2004), Sgang rgyal mtshan tshe ring (2002), and Zla ba tshe ring and Bstan 'dzin rnam rgyal (2004) are works providing examples and discussion of scores of folk traditions, but do not mention Tibetan tongue twisters.

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<sup>1</sup> "Eager to impress, I decided to try and master a few Swedish phrases before departing for the northern city of Umeå (which I pronounced you-me-a). However, a quick search of the high street book stores produced nothing.

"If I had wanted to learn 'Business Swahili for Beginners', or perhaps get to grips with Tibetan Tongue Twisters, I'd have been in luck. Swedish, at least in the little corner of England I occupied, had apparently ceased to exist. I'd have to dig deeper." (<http://forum.clan00.de/archive/index.php/t-3111.html>) accessed 18 May 2007.

English-language studies on Tibetan oral traditions often suffer from one of two assumptions. One is that they conflate Tibetan culture with Tibetan Buddhism. An example of this is the work of Klein (1994, 2003) who discusses Tibetan orality only within the institutional religious context (see Tokaskar-Bakir 2000 for an instance of Tibetan religious orality in non-institutional contexts). This inability to disentangle Tibetan Buddhism from Tibetan culture is symptomatic of how Westerners generally view Tibet, and has been discussed at length elsewhere (e.g., Bishop 2001). A second assumption that authors typically make is to conflate oral traditions with performance traditions when discussing oral traditions in Tibetan areas. The whole corpus of 'Gesar studies' falls into this category (e.g., Zhambei Gyaltsho 2001, Yang 2001, Karmay 1993, Kornman 2005). The impression given by such works is that Tibetan oral traditions are the sole preserve of monks and performers, and not part of the fabric of people's daily lives.

Michael Aris' (1987) work on alternative oral literature in Bhutan challenges this impression by giving two examples of non-religious oral traditions situated in the gray area between performance and non-performance traditions. Goldstein (1982) has also given an example of a Tibetan oral tradition that is neither religious nor a specialist performance genre. By far the best treatment of orality in a Tibetan context, however, is Anton-Luca (2002) who contextualizes Amdo folk song practices in terms of the high value placed on the spoken word in northeast Tibet. It is within this context of a pervasive, vernacular, and much-valued orality that the present work should be read for it preserves a record of local tongue twisters that typify a local community in Amdo; contextualizes their use by reporting certain tongue twisters that were at one time energetically recited in Pha bzhi; and more specifically, describes and illustrates how people learned tongue twisters,

how they were told, why they were entertaining, and why they improved fluency in Tibetan and taught knowledge of the natural world.

The first author learned tongue twisters mostly from herders in the mountains where he spent eight years of his childhood and began writing this article on the basis of the tongue twisters that he could remember. Then in 2004, he interviewed village elders who retained memory of tongue twisters and who provided additional examples.

## CONSULTANTS

Lcags mo rgyal (1915-2007) was illiterate. She lived her life in the Skya rgya Mountains herding yaks after divorcing her husband in 1945. She retired from herding in 2005 and lived the remainder of her life at a cousin's home in Pha bzhi. When Blo rtan rdo rje interviewed her in 2005, she had forgotten many tongue twisters. She had never traveled outside the local area. She was a great storyteller and inspired narrator of the Gesar epic. She recounted folklore vividly. She laughed and cried, and her voice was gentle and then coarse at appropriate times. She provided Tongue Twister Ten—*a bcu cha bcu*, and Tongue Twister Thirteen—*a the the brgyad*.

Rdo rje bkra shis (b. 1940) taught Blo rtan rdo rje tongue twisters when Blo rtan rdo rje was a child. He has some competency in reading Tibetan; he knows no Chinese. Blo rtan rdo rje interviewed him in the summer of 2005 while he was going to the mountains to herd. He provided Tongue Twister Five—*glang ngu dkar dmar gnyis* and Tongue Twister Twelve—*a mtshar mtshar dgu*.

Mgon po rgya mtsho (b. 1936) is a tailor who travels in Amdo Tibetan areas. He makes Tibetan robes and Tibetan style jackets, shirts, winter coats, and so on. He provided Tongue Twister Fourteen—*med la med dgu* and Tongue Twister Fifteen—*chags la chags dgu*.

## INTRODUCTION TO PHA BZHI

Pha bzhi Village is situated ten kilometers south of the nearest town, Gdong sna<sup>2</sup> Town (*zhen* 镇). In 2008 Gdong sna, twenty-three kilometers northeast of Gcan tsha County Town, had a predominantly Muslim (Hui 回)<sup>3</sup> population. Pha bzhi literally translates as 'father-four' because local residents trace their ancestry to four Tibetan soldiers who were posted from Central Tibet by the Tibetan government during the Thu bhod<sup>4</sup> Kingdom. When Lha lung dpal rdor assassinated the last Tibetan king, Glang dar ma,<sup>5</sup> in 845

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<sup>2</sup> Gdong sna = Kangyang 康 杨. According to local elders, Gdong sna was called *chu*, meaning 'water', by locals until the army of the local warlord, Ma Bufang 马步芳 (1902-1973), invaded. This name was likely related to the Yellow River (Rma chu, Huanghe 黄河) that flows through the area. Rgya skor and Skar ma thang villages were socially and religiously connected until the 1950s, when they were separated.

<sup>3</sup> 'He he' (Huihui 回回) is a term locals use to refer to people who wear white skull-caps or black veils, practice Islam, and reside along the Yellow River in today's Kangyang Town. Elderly Muslims here speak perfect Tibetan. Local Tibetans call them 'Rgya he' which literally means 'Chinese Hui'.

<sup>4</sup> Thu bhod = Tubo 吐蕃.

<sup>5</sup> Usually written 'Langdarma', he was the brother of the great Dharma king, Ral pa can, and the persecutor of the

A.D., this spelled the collapse of the Thu bod Kingdom. The four soldiers mentioned above lived the remainder of their lives in the local area and, in time, their offspring grew in population. Today, Pha bzhi consists of thirty-nine households (346 residents), all of whom are Tibetan. Pha bzhi is one of Skya rgya Administrative Village's four subdivisions; Rog ma, Bar tsig, and Rkyang tse are the other three.

Local residents believe in the teachings of all Tibetan Buddhist sects, although Gelukpa<sup>6</sup> is the most important. There are no local Bon devotees. Pha bzhi inhabitants venerate A myes Srin po, an important local mountain deity, A myes Dam chen of the Nyingma Lineage, and A myes Yul lha. They frequently consult the three deities just mentioned and regularly offer them *bsang*<sup>7</sup> in order to gain merit for their families.

Most residents farm and have a few head of livestock. Each family raises swine that are butchered in winter. Feeding swine is women's labor. If a family does not raise pigs, the housewife is considered lazy. Residents typically live in flat-mud-roofed one-story structures made of wood and adobe bricks, built within a rectangular adobe-

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Sangha in central Tibet in the course of his five-year reign, during which he attempted to eradicate Buddhism in Tibet.

<sup>6</sup> Dge lugs pa = Gelupai 格鲁派 and Huangjiao 黄教 (Yellow Sect), founded by Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the great Tibetan Buddhist reformer. It is one of the four major Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The establishment of Ganden (Dga' ldan) Monastery in 1409 by Tsong kha pa marked the actual foundation of the Dge lugs pa tradition. Since the mid seventeenth century, Dge lugs pa has been the dominant Tibetan religious-political power.

<sup>7</sup> *Bsang* is incense consisting of juniper branches and leaves. Parched barley flour, fruit, bread, candies, and liquor may also be added and burnt with the juniper.

wall compound. In recent years, certain financially well-off residents have built large wood houses with big courtyard gates featuring exquisitely carved dragons, lions, birds, and flowers, along with colorful paintings. Homes prominently display bowls, basins, kettles, thermoses, dishes, and mirrors as decorations.

Younger people respect older people and women respect men. It is considered improper for women to sit cross-legged or with their buttocks touching the ground, especially when men are present. Drinking and smoking are taboo for women. Additionally, women guard against being labeled chatty and impulsive.

Older residents wear robes made of wool or lambskin and goatskin. In 2008, western style suits, jackets, and jeans were popular. Residents born later than about 1965 had stopped wearing traditional costumes, except on such special occasions as the New Year period and during village festivals.

Commonly, men and women between the ages of seventeen and forty years leave the village to work. Traditionally, men earned money for family expenses, however, women also began to leave the home to work at temporary, salaried jobs beginning in 2005. Women leaving the home puts added strain on the elderly who are left with the responsibility of caring for young children and doing domestic chores. Nevertheless, living conditions in 2008 in terms of clothing, food, housing, house furnishings, and access to medical care were better than ever before. After planting fields in mid-spring, women leave with men to work in Mgo log,<sup>8</sup> Yul shul,<sup>9</sup> and Mtsho byang<sup>10</sup> Tibetan autonomous prefectures, and other herding areas in Qinghai

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<sup>8</sup> Mgo log = Guoluo 果洛.

<sup>9</sup> Yul shul = Yushu 玉树.

<sup>10</sup> Mtsho byang = Haibei 海北.

to collect caterpillar fungus<sup>11</sup> and/ or build animal enclosures for herdsman. Only old people and young children remain in the village. In autumn, adult villagers return for the annual harvest.

The availability of pesticides has replaced the need for labor-intensive weeding that was historically done by women. The harvest is usually completed in about a month. Afterwards, both men and women again leave to do road work and travel to Zi ling<sup>12</sup> City to do construction work. They earned an average of around thirty RMB 人民币 per day in 2008.



Blo rtan rdo rje writes:

The scenic So zis Mountain stood strikingly,  
cradling some courteous herders. Two transparent  
streams trickled ceaselessly, resembling an endless  
*kha btags*<sup>13</sup> hanging from around A myes So zis's<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu* = *dongchong xiacao* 冬虫夏草 = *Cordyceps sinensis*, the result of a parasitic relationship between a fungus *Cordyceps* and the larva of the ghost moth (several *Thitarodes* species) that live in high altitude areas in China (the Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai, western Sichuan, southwest Gansu, northwest Yunnan) and in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The fungus invades the larva, kills it and grows a fruiting body out of its head in spring. It is used in traditional Tibetan and Chinese medicines.

<sup>12</sup> Zi ling = Xining 西宁.

<sup>13</sup> Frequently written *khatag*, it is a strip of silk indicating auspiciousness when offered to people.

<sup>14</sup> The mountain deity venerated by herders residing in the So zis Mountains is A myes So zis, who protects their livestock. Herders believe A myes So zis is visible and



broad shoulders; thick trees harbored thousands of wild animals that lived in great fear of Ma Fumin,<sup>15</sup> a merciless Muslim hunter.

Pondering my childhood in the So zis Mountains, my mind strides back among their peaks, where I spent much of my childhood and learned such important and meaningful things as tongue twisters.

The So zis Mountains lie seven hours on foot from Pha bzhi. In the mid-1980s, I was just old enough to be afraid of doing things that might hurt me. Grandmother came home one day and wanted to take me into the mountains where she herded our yaks and goats. My parents thought that it would be an additional burden for her to care for me because she already had many herding chores, and refused. Grandmother knew that I liked birds and caught my interest by saying that there were many beautiful birds to play with and much milk to drink in the

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helpful only to those who regularly pray and offer sacrifices to him. A local account relates that A myes So zis paid a nocturnal visit to A myes Brag dkar's (White Mountain God) wife and was subsequently caught by A myes Brag dkar and subdued. A large valley divides these two mountains. In 2008, A myes Brag dkar belonged to Lowa Village in Mtsho drug (Cuozhou 措周) Township and A myes So zis belonged to Skya rgya (Jiajia 贾加) Township.

<sup>15</sup> Ma Fumin 马富民 was a hunter who lived in the So zis Mountains and hunted musk deer for their musk; wild cattle for their meat; wild felines (*rtsa g.yug*), wolves, and foxes for their skins; eagles for their feathers; and other wild animals whose skins were valuable. He was from Rgya nang (Yangjia 杨家) Village, had a long narrow chin with a scraggly beard, and was thus called 'Mr. Chin' (Rgya ma ne).

mountains. I already wanted to go with her, and when I heard about the birds, I was filled with an even greater desire to do so. Finally, my parents agreed, and I was finally tied on a saddled donkey and taken into the serene mountains.

On the way up to our destination, Grandmother told me some amusing folktales and also taught me a beautiful Tibetan love song that I still remember:

<sup>1</sup> rgod thang dkar snying la rje bo  
<sup>2</sup> brag dmar ro rig na 'gro la khad  
<sup>3</sup> dgung sngon po rig na 'phur la khad  
<sup>4</sup> bya khyod tsho'i sems de nyis 'gal red  
<sup>5</sup> nga nyis 'gal bya zig dgos don med

<sup>6</sup> rogs chung lo snying la rje bo  
<sup>7</sup> rogs nged tsho rig na rtse la khad  
<sup>8</sup> khyim chung ma rig na 'gro la khad  
<sup>9</sup> rogs khyod tsho'i sems de nyis 'ga' red  
<sup>10</sup> nga nyis 'ga' rogs zig dgos don med

<sup>1</sup> γko thəŋ γkar ŋəŋ lə dʒi ũ  
<sup>2</sup> dʒax γməŋ ru rəx na ndʒu lə khe  
<sup>3</sup> gəŋ ŋon bo rəx na phər lə khe  
<sup>4</sup> ʧʌ jho tshi səm ti ŋi ŋɿ re  
<sup>5</sup> ŋʌ ŋi ŋɿ ʧʌ zəx γgi ton me

<sup>6</sup> rox tʃhəŋ lu ŋəŋ lə dʒi ũ  
<sup>7</sup> rox ŋe tsho rək na rtse lə khe  
<sup>8</sup> jhəm tʃhəŋ mʌ rək na ndʒo lə khe  
<sup>9</sup> rox jho tshi səm ti ŋi ŋɿ re  
<sup>10</sup> ŋʌ ŋi ŋɿ rox zəx γgi ton me

- <sup>1</sup> You pretty, poor vulture,  
<sup>2</sup> You try to land when you see the red cliff,  
<sup>3</sup> You try to fly away when you see the blue sky,  
<sup>4</sup> You bird, your mind is two-sided,  
<sup>5</sup> I don't need such a duplicitous bird.
- <sup>6</sup> You pretty, poor lover,  
<sup>7</sup> You try to play<sup>16</sup> when you see me,  
<sup>8</sup> You try to sneak away when you see your wife,  
<sup>9</sup> You lover, your mind is two-sided,  
<sup>10</sup> I don't need such a duplicitous lover.

It was late afternoon when we reached a mountaintop and could clearly view the majesty of the So zis Mountains that lay sprawled before us. In my imagination, they resembled a huge statue of a wrathful mountain deity that I had seen in shrines. We had a short rest, and Grandmother pointed to the lower part of the mountains where lines of smoke strode straight into the scenic sky. The whole area was covered with dense forests. All that could be heard was the bleating of goats and the chirping of birds. As we sat atop the mountain, a melodious traditional song drifted up to us. "Oh, that's Mr. Sausage (Skal dan<sup>17</sup>) singing," said Grandmother, jerking her head up and peering around.

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<sup>16</sup> To play by singing *la gzhas* 'Tibetan love songs' antiphonally in competition, while audience members gather round, drink, and meanwhile, tuck money in the hat bands and in the braids of those whose songs attract them.

<sup>17</sup> Sausage = (Literary Tibetan) *rgyu ma* or *g.yos rgyu*. Colloquial terms include *g.yos* and *skal dan*; *g.yos* is the short term for *g.yos rgyu* used by locals. *Skal dan* is also a common local term for a piece or pieces of sausages and other small pieces of internal organs that a family gives to

Startled, I asked, "Do people really have such weird names?"

"He is one of our neighbors. People here are called by the nicknames that we give each other. He was given this name because of the shape of his body," she replied.

"What's your nickname? What do your neighbors call you?" I asked.

She shook her head, laughed, and said, "You will learn mine soon." She then stood and tried to tie me back on the donkey, but I resisted because I was tired of sitting on the donkey after more than seven hours. She then carried me on her back to her cottage, which was a building surrounded by a line of living bushes, which were home to darting, chirping birds. The cottage was small but the fence around it was very large for it was also used as a yak enclosure. The cottage walls were thin and made up of canes of wood woven together and then coated with a firm layer of dried yak-dung as insulation. A small window permitted a few rays of light to enter the room. Inside the small cottage, there were sacks full of dried bread, butter, cheese, edible roots (*gro ma*, *renshen guo* 人參果), parched barley flour (*rtsam pa*), and potatoes. Meat hung from the rafters to keep it safe from rats. There was no real door; instead a bundle of wood blocked the entrance when Grandmother was away. Anyone who passed by this cottage could enter any time to rest and eat what was there.

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each family in Pha bzhi as a share when a pig, a yak, or a sheep is slaughtered (usually in October) for winter use. Parents prepare plates with *skal dan* according to the number of households in the community and ask their children to take the *skal dan* to each household.

Grandmother seemed tired. After taking a deep breath, she unloaded a bundle of bread from the donkey just as some men howled loudly, as though they were competing to see who could howl the loudest. Their howls echoed in the tranquil So zis Valley.

"Who are those people? Why are they howling so loudly?" I asked.

"They are herders here from our village. They came here a long time ago and they seldom leave this area. You haven't met them. They live just down there and we are all neighbors," Grandmother replied, not answering my second question.

"Why are they howling so loudly?" I asked again.

"There are many wolves here that kill our livestock. Wolves are afraid of human shouts, so they are scaring away the wolves," Grandmother explained.

I ran to a corner of the fence where I could see the men coming up towards our cottage. I ran back to Grandmother in apprehension.

Very soon, three older men and one middle-aged man brought a kettle of hot milk tea that they had readied for us. Grandmother smiled appreciatively. Their garments were made from animal skins. They talked quickly and loudly, as if they were one hundred meters apart. They asked Grandmother about our village and me—my name and my age. "His father is a big, tall man but he doesn't seem to grow tall. He takes after his mother," said one man who had a huge beard and who was nicknamed Uncle Beard (A khu Rgya). Then they continued their discussion, delving into my maternal lineage. They said that my mother's uncle was also very short and so were his children; therefore, I must

take after my mother's uncle. Meanwhile, I went outside.

When I returned about an hour later, Grandmother was stoking a fire under a big pot. In the area for sitting in front of the hearth, a bearded man topped by a white skullcap was skinning a goat-like animal. I dared not look closely. The man looked at me and smiled.

I had negative impressions of Muslims because, "We will give you to a Muslim," is a commonly used utterance parents use to stop children from crying.

"Who is this person?" I cried.

Before Grandmother could answer, the man said in perfect Tibetan, "I am Ma Fumin. We are all friends."

I quickly moved close to Grandmother and asked, "What is he doing with that?" pointing to the dead animal being cut into pieces.

"He is a Muslim hunter. He hunts musk deer and foxes. He comes here every year and stays for some months. We have become friends. That's a musk deer that he killed this afternoon. He often gives us the meat. We will cook it for supper," Grandmother said and then muttered some prayers.

"Why do you let him in our cottage?" I asked.

"Our neighbors made friends with him. They wanted me to be the cook so I have to cook what we have," explained Grandmother as she added more firewood under the pot. By then, Ma Fumin had finished butchering the animal and added pieces of meat into the now boiling pot. There were five herders. Grandmother was their cook. In return, they tended our livestock.

In the evenings, when they had driven the livestock into their enclosures, they were content to

congregate in our cottage to eat and talk. At times, they mumbled strange words to each other that I found incomprehensible. Once they came up with a topic, whether small or big, they talked about it thoroughly without eliminating a single bit of information. Whatever they brought into their conversation was made special and fun by embellishing it with old proverbs that made their language colorful. Every evening they had something new to talk about and their discussions lasted deep into the night. Their meetings usually ended with storytelling. This was how those humble herders enjoyed their leisure time.

A half-year passed happily. Then a boy, Don 'grub, came to the area with his mother, an older woman who was deaf. She gestured to communicate with others. She was called A ye Baba because *ba-ba* was the only sound she could make and she would make this sound repeatedly whenever she gestured. They settled and became our neighbors. Don 'grub was my age and soon became my playmate.

We loved to listen to the old herders' talks and stories as well as the tongue twisters that they taught us every night. They said a tongue twister and then praised us when we repeated it correctly. We tried hard to perfectly pronounce what we were taught. And when we did, we were delighted. They talked about their youth and people's bravery from bygone times, told intriguing stories, and repeated tongue twisters that made our long, quiet nights slip by quickly and enjoyably.

Mr. Sausage was a quiet man who struggled to fill the moments between his silences with something fun. Now and then he would sensitively articulate riddles and tongue twisters that referred to

human reproductive organs that brought both  
laughter and shocked silence to our humble cottage.  
The riddle below was one of his favorites:

<sup>1</sup> pha bong gnyis kyi khri steng na  
<sup>2</sup> klu btsan rgyal po khri la bzhugs  
<sup>3</sup> mgo na sta res rgyab shul yod  
<sup>4</sup> ske na thag pa drud shul yod

<sup>1</sup> phΛ γəŋ ŋi jə tʃhə rtəŋ nΛ  
<sup>2</sup> γlə tsan jɛl wo tʃhə lΛ zəx  
<sup>3</sup> ngo nΛ rtΛ ri jəb hçə yo  
<sup>4</sup> γki nΛ thax pΛ dzə hçə yo

<sup>1</sup> Atop the throne of two boulders,  
<sup>2</sup> The wrathful *nāga*<sup>18</sup> King is enthroned.  
<sup>3</sup> There, on its head is a slit,<sup>19</sup> left by an ax,  
<sup>4</sup> There, around its neck, is a rub<sup>20</sup> left by a rope.

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<sup>18</sup> *Klu* = *nāga* in Sanskrit and literally means 'snake' and more specifically 'cobra'. The *nāga* are mythically believed to be half-human and half-serpent beings living mainly in water (lakes, springs, oceans), wet forest areas, and perhaps even in a single tree. They resemble snakes and frogs and may change into human form. *Klu* as water-spirits and serpent beings are conceived of as mighty and wrathful; they can help or harm. They wreak vengeance by provoking infectious diseases and skin ailments when they are offended. Belief in and ritual practices related to *nāga* were vibrant in Tibetan communities in 2008.

<sup>19</sup> The meatus or opening of the urethra, is at the tip of the glans penis.

<sup>20</sup> The sulcus or groove in the penile shaft behind the glans penis.



One of his oft-repeated tongue twisters is easily mispronounced:

1

a khu rgyal po'i mna' ma  
*Uncle King's Daughter-in-law*

a khu rgyal po tshang gi mna' ma gi gnya' gi gnyer  
ma gi nang na shig zig yod gi

a khə jəl ũ tshaŋ kə na ma kə ŋa kə ŋer mΛ  
kə naŋ nΛ hçək zəx jo kə

In the fold of Uncle King's family's daughter-in-law's neck, there's a louse.

The humor of this tongue twister derives from the sound similarity between *nya ma* 'vagina' and *gnyer ma* 'fold'.

One of the most enjoyable times was the competitions Don 'grub and I had with tongue twisters. We challenged each other to say a tongue twister quickly in a short, given time without mispronunciation, sentence or word disorder, and word omission. Before each competition, we discussed what the loser would have to do for the winner. Sometimes, the loser carried the winner on his back for a predetermined distance, and sometimes the loser had to obey the winner, as though a king were giving commands. We called the winner the King and the loser the Minister.

At age nine, I left this place to attend school in my home village, spelling an end to my close association with tongue twisters and many other marvels.

When I was studying at Qinghai Normal University during the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, a few students from Amdo occasionally repeated their own local tongue twisters. Here is one example:

2

gus tsong  
*Leek and Shallot*

gus tsong gnyis gi gong gang dka' gong gus dka'  
gong tsong dka'

ki tsoŋ ɳək kə koŋ kaŋ ɣka koŋ ki ɣka koŋ  
tsoŋ ɣka

Which is more expensive, leek or shallot? Leek is expensive but shallot is more expensive.

## TONGUE TWISTER CHARACTERISTICS

The formal term for 'tongue twister' in Tibetan is *ngag sbyang rtsom rig*. However, most Tibetans living in the area this article focuses on refer to them as *kha bshad* 'oral sayings'. We have chosen to translate *kha bshad* as 'tongue twisters' rather than 'oral sayings' as this term better reflects the nature of the material under consideration, and employing the term 'oral sayings' suggests something akin to 'idioms' or 'expressions'.

Local consultants were unable to provide any information on the origins of tongue twister origins; either their beginnings or their creators.

Tibetan tongue twisters develop facility in the Tibetan language and instruct children in knowledge of human nature, daily life, wildlife, livestock, counting,

farming, plants, snow, rain, water, the sun, the moon, the stars, and all that confirm the world in which they live. Another distinctive characteristic of Tibetan tongue twisters is that learning and repeating them is fun; as indicated in the personal account above. The ingenious use of language in Tibetan tongue twisters puts tongue twisters on par with great poems—they are an important part of Tibetan oral literature.

Tongue twisters are composed of clusters of words and phrases that have a succession of similar consonantal sounds that makes the voice move up and down rhythmically and repeatedly. This helps children perceive the differences between sounds and assists in achieving clear pronunciation.

Each tongue twister has a particular intonation, rhythm, and stress pattern and should be said as quickly as possible. The 'correct' performance of a tongue twister involves attention to these elements, as well as word order and vocabulary choice.

A number of similar consonant sounds are used sequentially in examples of tongue twisters provided in this paper. Such sounds make it difficult to articulate the tongue twisters quickly and accurately. For instance, *gnya'* *nya*, *gnya'* *gnyer*, *tsong'* *gong*, *gus'* *gang*, *drug'* *grig*, *bzhi'* *gzhu*, *bdun'* *ldum*, *lnga'* *nga*, *brgyad'* *sgyel* and so forth, relying on properties unique to Amdo phonology. Furthermore, such terms as *'then* *'then*, *rdung* *rdung*, and *rgyag* *rgyag* (Tongue Twister Three) are a significant part of colloquial Amdo. These structures rely on the duplication of a verb, and give the meaning, 'Just like the way something is done'.

## EXAMPLES OF TONGUE TWISTERS

### 3

btsog bshad

*Dirty Saying*

It is taboo to repeat this tongue twister in the home or within earshot of relatives. Such tongue twisters are most commonly said in the mountains, at parties where friends of the same age gather, and when people are herding or at work and no relatives are nearby. Though often heard in the mid-1980s, this tongue twister was almost never heard in 2008. It may be the last 'dirty saying' still extant in the local area.

- <sup>1</sup> gcig mdzag nya ma'i kha red
- <sup>2</sup> gnyis mdzag nya ma'i dkyil red
- <sup>3</sup> gsum mdzag nya ma'i gting red
- <sup>4</sup> bzhi mdzag gzhu phrug 'then 'then
- <sup>5</sup> lnga mdzag rnga tsis rdung rdung
- <sup>6</sup> drug mdzag grig ril rgyag rgyag
- <sup>7</sup> bdun mdzag ldum bu rtsag rtsag
- <sup>8</sup> brgyad mdzag rgyed gi rgyed gi
- <sup>9</sup> dgu mdzag sgur gi sgur gi
- <sup>10</sup> bcu mdzag zer ra bu gcig btsas
- <sup>11</sup> bu gi mying nga 'dod lha zer
- <sup>12</sup> 'dod lha mi zer rta ser zer
- <sup>13</sup> rta ser mi zer bong ser zer

- <sup>1</sup> htək zəx ɲa mi kha re
- <sup>2</sup> ɲi zəx ɲa mi htɕi re
- <sup>3</sup> səm zəx ɲa mi htaŋ re
- <sup>4</sup> zə zəx zə tʂhəg then then
- <sup>5</sup> ɲa zəx ɲa htsi rduŋ rduŋ
- <sup>6</sup> tʂəg zəx dzəg ri jəg jəg
- <sup>7</sup> dun zəx dum mbə hstəg hstəg

<sup>8</sup> jet zəx jet kə jet kə  
<sup>9</sup> gə zəx gər gə gər gə  
<sup>10</sup> tɛə zəx ser ra wə tɛəg si  
<sup>11</sup> wə kə ɲaŋ ɲa do ʔa ser  
<sup>12</sup> do ʔa mə ser ɣta ser ser  
<sup>13</sup> ɣta sher mə ser ɣəŋ sher ser

<sup>1</sup> Having sex once, it reaches the vagina's mouth,  
<sup>2</sup> Having sex twice, it reaches half-way into the vagina,  
<sup>3</sup> Having sex thrice, it reaches deep inside the vagina.  
<sup>4</sup> Having sex four times is like pulling supple bows,  
<sup>5</sup> Having sex five times is like beating drums,  
<sup>6</sup> Having sex six times is like bouncing little balls,  
<sup>7</sup> Having sex seven times is like weeding the fields,  
<sup>8</sup> Having sex eight times makes one feeble-legged.  
<sup>9</sup> Having sex nine times makes one stooped,  
<sup>10</sup> Having sex ten times, a baby boy is born,  
<sup>11</sup> The baby boy is named God of Desire,  
<sup>12</sup> He's not called God of Desire, but *rta sar*,<sup>21</sup>  
<sup>13</sup> It's not *rta sar*, but it's *bong sar*.<sup>22</sup>

4

rta dkar nag gnyis  
*Two Horses, Black and White*

'Two Horses, Black and White' compares black horses and white horses that Tibetan children often encountered in the

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<sup>21</sup> A *rta sar* is a good, adult male horse that has not been castrated and is kept especially for breeding.

<sup>22</sup> A *bong sar* is a good, adult male donkey that has not been castrated and is kept especially for breeding.

past.<sup>23</sup> By learning this tongue twister, children learn to easily distinguish between the colors black and white.

<sup>1</sup> rta dkar dkar rnga ma nag nag can  
<sup>2</sup> rnga ma nag nag gi rta dkar dkar can  
<sup>3</sup> rta dkar dkar rnga ma dkar dkar can  
<sup>4</sup> rnga ma dkar dkar gi rta dkar dkar can  
<sup>5</sup> rta nag nag rnga ma dkar dkar can  
<sup>6</sup> rnga ma dkar dkar gi rta nag nag can  
<sup>7</sup> rta nag nag rnga ma nag nag can  
<sup>8</sup> rnga ma nag nag gi rta nag nag can

<sup>1</sup> yta ykar ykar yña ma nax nax tɛan  
<sup>2</sup> yña ma nax nax kə yta ykar ykar tɛan  
<sup>3</sup> yta ykar ykar yña ma ykar ykar tɛan  
<sup>4</sup> yña ma ykar ykar kə yta ykar ykar tɛan  
<sup>5</sup> yta nax nax yña ma ykar ykar tɛan  
<sup>6</sup> yña ma ykar ykar kə yta nax nax tɛan  
<sup>7</sup> yta nax nax yña ma nax nax tɛan  
<sup>8</sup> yña ma nax nax kə yta nax nax tɛan

<sup>1</sup> White, white horses with black, black tails,  
<sup>2</sup> Black, black-tailed white, white horses.  
<sup>3</sup> White, white horses with white, white tails,  
<sup>4</sup> White, white-tailed white, white horses.  
<sup>5</sup> Black, black horses with white, white tails,  
<sup>6</sup> White, white-tailed black, black horses.  
<sup>7</sup> Black, black horses with black, black tails,  
<sup>8</sup> Black, black-tailed black, black horses.

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<sup>23</sup> There were few horses in the local area in 2008. Motorcycles had replaced them. Most households owned mules and donkeys for farm work.

5

glang ngu dkar dmar gnyis  
*Two Bulls, Red and White*

'Two Bulls, Red and White' emphasizes the differences between big and small by comparing a white bull with big hooves and a dark-red bull with small hooves. Such bulls are common in the area.

- <sup>1</sup> glang ngu dkar po'i rmig pa dmar ro chung  
<sup>2</sup> rmig pa dmar po'i glang ngu dkar ro che  
<sup>3</sup> glang ngu dmar po'i rmig pa dkar ro chung  
<sup>4</sup> rmig pa dkar po'i glang ngu dmar ro che

- <sup>1</sup> γlan̄ŋ n̄ə γkar pi rm̄əx pa γm̄ər ru t̄h̄əŋ  
<sup>2</sup> rm̄əx pa γm̄ər pi γlan̄ŋ n̄ə γkar ru t̄əhe  
<sup>3</sup> γlan̄ŋ n̄ə γm̄ər pi rm̄əx pa γkar ru t̄h̄əŋ  
<sup>4</sup> rm̄əx pa γkar pi γlan̄ŋ n̄ə γm̄ər ru t̄əhe

- <sup>1</sup> White bulls' red hooves are small,  
<sup>2</sup> Red-hoofed white bulls are big.  
<sup>3</sup> Red bulls' white hooves are small,  
<sup>4</sup> White hoofed red bulls are big.

6

ba lug blo ro  
*Lung-diseased Cattle and Sheep*

'Lung-diseased Cattle and Sheep' presents a vivid image of two ill animals. This tongue twister is formed with just four words that also form its title. Its use and repetition of *ba* (pronounced *wa*), *lug*, *blo* (pronounced *lo*), and *ro* rigorously exercise the tongue and help children gain facility in pronouncing Tibetan.

<sup>1</sup> ba blo ro lug blo ro

<sup>2</sup> lug blo ro ba blo ro

<sup>3</sup> ba lug blo ro

<sup>4</sup> lug ba blo ro

<sup>1</sup> wΛ ylu ru ləx ylu ru

<sup>2</sup> ləx ylu ru wΛ ylu ru

<sup>3</sup> wΛ ləx ylu ru

<sup>4</sup> ləx wΛ ylu ru

<sup>1</sup> Lung-diseased cattle, lung-diseased sheep.

<sup>2</sup> Lung-diseased sheep, lung-diseased cattle.

<sup>3</sup> Lung-diseased cattle and sheep.

<sup>4</sup> Lung-diseased sheep and cattle.

7

ma ne nang gi gser

*Gold in the Chin*

'Gold in the Chin' begins with a simple question and proceeds with a chain of pertinent questions, each of which is given a short, complete answer. Two children commonly practice such tongue twisters surrounded by their attentively listening playmates. This tongue twister challenges children to give quick answers and, importantly, encourages improvisation to create questions.

<sup>1</sup> A: khyo'i ma ne nang na ci yod

<sup>2</sup> B: nga'i ma ne nang na gser yod

<sup>3</sup> A: gser ga re

<sup>4</sup> B: gser sgam nang na yod

<sup>5</sup> A: sgam ga re

<sup>6</sup> B: sgam rtswa phung 'og na yod

<sup>7</sup> A: rtswa phung ga re

<sup>8</sup> B: rtswa mdzo mos zos thal

<sup>9</sup> A: mdzo mo ga re



<sup>10</sup> B: mdzo mo la mgor 'gos thal

<sup>11</sup> A: la ga re

<sup>12</sup> B: la khangs gi mnan thal

<sup>13</sup> A: khangs ga re

<sup>14</sup> B: khangs nyi mas gzhus thal

<sup>15</sup> A: nyi ma ga re

<sup>16</sup> B: ...

<sup>17</sup> A: ... ?

<sup>1</sup> A: jhi ma ne naŋ na tɕə jod

<sup>2</sup> B: ŋi ma ne naŋ na ser jod

<sup>3</sup> A: ser ka re

<sup>4</sup> B: ser gam naŋ na jod

<sup>5</sup> A: gam ka re

<sup>6</sup> B: gam htsa phuŋ ok na jod

<sup>7</sup> A: htsa phuŋ ka re

<sup>8</sup> B: htsa mdzo mi si tha

<sup>9</sup> A: mdzo mo ka re

<sup>10</sup> B: mdzo mo la mgor gi tha

<sup>11</sup> A: la ka re

<sup>12</sup> B: la khaŋ kə nan tha

<sup>13</sup> A: khaŋ ka re

<sup>14</sup> B: khaŋ ŋə mi zi tha

<sup>15</sup> A: ŋə ma ka re

<sup>16</sup> B: ...

<sup>17</sup> A: ... ?

<sup>1</sup> A: What's there in your chin?

<sup>2</sup> B: There's gold in my chin.

<sup>3</sup> A: Where is the gold?

<sup>4</sup> B: The gold is in a box.

<sup>5</sup> A: Where is the box?

<sup>6</sup> B: The box is under a pile of hay.

<sup>7</sup> A: Where is the hay?

<sup>8</sup> B: The *mdzo mo*<sup>24</sup> ate the hay.

<sup>9</sup> A: Where is the *mdzo mo*?

<sup>10</sup> B: The *mdzo mo* climbed up the mountain pass.

<sup>11</sup> A: Where is the mountain pass?

<sup>12</sup> B: Snow has covered the mountain pass.

<sup>13</sup> A: Where is the snow?

<sup>14</sup> B: The sun melted the snow.

<sup>15</sup> A: Where is the sun?

<sup>16</sup> B: ...

<sup>17</sup> A: ... ?

8

a zhang tshang gi khang thog na  
*On the Roof of Uncle's Home*

Drying grain on the roof of houses is a common practice and people are angry when birds eat the grain. 'On The Roof of Uncle's Home' is recited rhythmically by a group of children.

<sup>1</sup> a zhang tshang gi khang thog na

<sup>2</sup> gro 'bru nas 'bru tha ra ra

<sup>3</sup> bye'u thu zig gi btus srol ltos

<sup>4</sup> bye'u thu bye'u thi ma zer dang

<sup>5</sup> bye'u thu khya gis bsad thal

<sup>6</sup> khya khya ma zer dang

<sup>7</sup> khya brag 'a babs thal

<sup>8</sup> brag brag ma zer dang

<sup>9</sup> brag 'a 'jag ma khebs thal

<sup>10</sup> 'jag ma 'jag ma ma zer dang

<sup>11</sup> 'jag ma ra mas btogs thal

<sup>12</sup> ra ma ra ma ma zer dang

<sup>13</sup> ra ma spyang kis bsad thal

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<sup>24</sup> A *mdzo mo* is a yak-cow cross that is valued for its milk production.

<sup>14</sup> spyang ki spyang ki ma zer dang  
<sup>15</sup> spyang ki nags 'a bros thal  
<sup>16</sup> nags nags ma zer dang  
<sup>17</sup> nags sta res bcad thal  
<sup>18</sup> sta re sta re ma zer dang  
<sup>19</sup> sta re mgar bas khyer thal  
<sup>20</sup> mgar ba mgar ba ma zer dang  
<sup>21</sup> mgar ba 'dam ma zug thal  
<sup>22</sup> 'dam 'dam ma zer dang  
<sup>23</sup> 'dam nyi mas ldag thal  
<sup>24</sup> nyi ma nyi ma ma zer dang  
<sup>25</sup> nyi ma tshang nga lhung thal  
<sup>26</sup> tshang tshang ma zer dang  
<sup>27</sup> tshang rlung gis spur thal  
<sup>28</sup> rlung rlung ma zer dang  
<sup>29</sup> rlung bya rgyal gshog pas khyer thal  
<sup>30</sup> bya rgyal bya rgyal ma zer dang  
<sup>31</sup> bya rgyal khyod kyis rjes mi zin

<sup>1</sup> a zaŋ tshaŋ kə khaŋ thok na  
<sup>2</sup> co mɔ̌ə ni mɔ̌ə tha ra ra  
<sup>3</sup> ɕi tə zəx kə ti sol hti  
<sup>4</sup> ɕi tə ɕi tə ma ser taŋ  
<sup>5</sup> ɕi tə ʃhʌ ki ɕsəd tha  
<sup>6</sup> ʃhʌ ʃhʌ ma ser taŋ  
<sup>7</sup> ʃhʌ dzax a wab daŋ  
<sup>8</sup> dzax dzax ma ser daŋ  
<sup>9</sup> dzax a ndzək ma htɕi tha  
<sup>10</sup> ndzək ma ndzək ma ma ser daŋ  
<sup>11</sup> ndzək ma ra mi tog tha  
<sup>12</sup> ra ma ra ma ma ser daŋ  
<sup>13</sup> ra ma htɕaŋ ki ɕsəd tha  
<sup>14</sup> htɕaŋ kə htɕaŋ kə ma ser daŋ  
<sup>15</sup> htɕaŋ kə nag a pɕsi tha  
<sup>16</sup> nag nag ma ser daŋ  
<sup>17</sup> nag ʂta ri cad tha

<sup>18</sup> hta ri hta ri ma ser daŋ  
<sup>19</sup> ʃta re mgar wi ʃher tha  
<sup>20</sup> mgar ba mgar ba ma ser daŋ  
<sup>21</sup> mkar ba dam ma zək tha  
<sup>22</sup> dam dam ma ser daŋ  
<sup>23</sup> dam nə mi dəg tha  
<sup>24</sup> nə ma nə ma ma ser daŋ  
<sup>25</sup> nə ma tshaŋ ɲa luŋ tha  
<sup>26</sup> tshaŋ tshaŋ ma ser daŋ  
<sup>27</sup> tshaŋ rluŋ ki ɸpər tha  
<sup>28</sup> rluŋ rluŋ ma ser daŋ  
<sup>29</sup> rluŋ ɕʌ ʒel hək pi ʃher tha  
<sup>30</sup> ɕa ʒel ɕʌ ʒel ma ser daŋ  
<sup>31</sup> ɕʌ ʒel ʃho ci rji mə zən

<sup>1</sup> On the roof of Uncle's home,  
<sup>2</sup> Barley and wheat grain are scattered everywhere.  
<sup>3</sup> Observe how the bird picks up grain.  
<sup>4</sup> Don't just say, 'Bird, bird,'  
<sup>5</sup> A hawk has killed the bird.  
<sup>6</sup> Don't just say, 'Hawk, hawk,'  
<sup>7</sup> The hawk has flown to a cliff.  
<sup>8</sup> Don't just say, 'Cliff, cliff,'  
<sup>9</sup> Weeds have covered the cliff.  
<sup>10</sup> Don't just say, 'Weeds, weeds,'  
<sup>11</sup> A goat has consumed the weeds.  
<sup>12</sup> Don't just say, 'Goat, goat,'  
<sup>13</sup> A wolf has killed the goat.  
<sup>14</sup> Don't just say, 'Wolf, wolf,'  
<sup>15</sup> The wolf has run into the woods.  
<sup>16</sup> Don't just say, 'Woods, woods,'  
<sup>17</sup> An ax has chopped the woods.  
<sup>18</sup> Don't just say, 'Ax, ax,'  
<sup>19</sup> A blacksmith has taken the ax,  
<sup>20</sup> Don't just say, 'Blacksmith, blacksmith,'  
<sup>21</sup> The blacksmith has got stuck in the mud.

- <sup>22</sup> Don't just say, 'Mud, mud,'  
<sup>23</sup> The sun has licked the mud.  
<sup>24</sup> Don't just say, 'Sun, sun,'  
<sup>25</sup> The sun has dropped into its nest.  
<sup>26</sup> Don't just say, 'Nest, nest,'  
<sup>27</sup> The wind has blown the nest away.  
<sup>28</sup> Don't just say, 'Wind, wind,'  
<sup>29</sup> The garuda's wings have ravished the wind.  
<sup>30</sup> Don't just say, 'Garuda, garuda,'  
<sup>31</sup> You cannot catch the garuda.

9

gser gyi ka sder ra<sup>25</sup>  
*Great Golden Bowl*

This tongue twister is related to counting and describes Yar nang shar,<sup>26</sup> a local place, and teaches how to count. One child recites this tongue twister as others carefully listen. If the child who is reciting inhales or miscounts, they have failed, and another child may try.

- <sup>1</sup> yar nang shar gi brag khung nang na  
<sup>2</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyi shu rtsa lnga yod zer gi  
<sup>3</sup> de dbugs kha gcig gis mi phyin zer gi  
<sup>4</sup> de dbugs kha gcig gis phyin btang na  
<sup>5</sup> ma Ni dung phyur zig gi phan yon yod zer gi

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<sup>25</sup> *Ka sder ra* = a local term for bigger bowls with lower, wider brims; *ka* = *dkar yol* 'bowls'; *sder* = *sder ma* 'plates'; and *ra* = emphasizes size or greatness.

<sup>26</sup> Yar nang shar 'Upper Eastern Mountain' is the site of an abandoned monastery. Local people believe that there are many treasures hidden here, but no one dares search for the treasures because they believe that if they dig in sacred places, bad luck will befall them. Certain local monks meditate in the cave year round.

<sup>6</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra gcig  
<sup>7</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra gnyis  
<sup>8</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra gsum  
<sup>9</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bzhi  
<sup>10</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra lnga  
<sup>11</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra drug  
<sup>12</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bdun  
<sup>13</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra brgyad  
<sup>14</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra dgu  
<sup>15</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu tham pa  
<sup>16</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu gcig  
<sup>17</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu gnyis  
<sup>18</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu gsum  
<sup>19</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu bzhi  
<sup>20</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bco lnga  
<sup>21</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu drug  
<sup>22</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu bdun  
<sup>23</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bco brgyad  
<sup>24</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra bcu dgu  
<sup>25</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyi shu  
<sup>26</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyer gcig  
<sup>27</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyer gnyis  
<sup>28</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyer gsum  
<sup>29</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyer bzhi  
<sup>30</sup> gser gyi ka sder ra nyer lnga

<sup>1</sup> jar naŋ ɕar gə tʂək khuŋ naŋ na  
<sup>2</sup> ser gə ka der ra nə ɕə rtsa ŋa jod ser kə  
<sup>3</sup> de ək ka htək ki mə cən ser kə  
<sup>4</sup> de ək ka htək ki cən taŋ na  
<sup>5</sup> ma nə tuŋ cər zəx kə han jun jod ser kə  
<sup>6</sup> ser gə ka der ra tək  
<sup>7</sup> ser gə ka der ra ŋi  
<sup>8</sup> ser gə ka der ra səm  
<sup>9</sup> ser gə ka der ra zə  
<sup>10</sup> ser gə ka der ra ŋa

- <sup>11</sup> ser gə ka der ra tʂək  
<sup>12</sup> ser gə ka der ra dən  
<sup>13</sup> ser gə ka der ra jed  
<sup>14</sup> ser gə ka der ra gə  
<sup>15</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə tham pa  
<sup>16</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə htək  
<sup>17</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə ɲi  
<sup>18</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə səm  
<sup>19</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə zə  
<sup>20</sup> ser gə ka der ra co ɲa  
<sup>21</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə tʂək  
<sup>22</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə dən  
<sup>23</sup> ser gə ka der ra co jed  
<sup>24</sup> ser gə ka der ra cə gə  
<sup>25</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲə ʂə  
<sup>26</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲer htək  
<sup>27</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲer ɲi  
<sup>28</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲer səm  
<sup>29</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲer zə  
<sup>30</sup> ser gə ka der ra ɲer ɲa

- <sup>1</sup> Inside the upper eastern mountain cave,  
<sup>2</sup> It is said that there are twenty-five great golden bowls;  
<sup>3</sup> It is said that no one can count them in a single breath.  
<sup>4</sup> If they are counted with one breath,  
<sup>5</sup> It brings the virtue of having chanted one hundred million  
prayers.  
<sup>6</sup> Great golden bowl one,  
<sup>7</sup> Great golden bowl two,  
<sup>8</sup> Great golden bowl three,  
<sup>9</sup> Great golden bowl four,  
<sup>10</sup> Great golden bowl five,  
<sup>11</sup> Great golden bowl six,  
<sup>12</sup> Great golden bowl seven,  
<sup>13</sup> Great golden bowl eight,  
<sup>14</sup> Great golden bowl nine,

- <sup>15</sup> Great golden bowl ten,  
<sup>16</sup> Great golden bowl eleven,  
<sup>17</sup> Great golden bowl twelve,  
<sup>18</sup> Great golden bowl thirteen,  
<sup>19</sup> Great golden bowl fourteen,  
<sup>20</sup> Great golden bowl fifteen,  
<sup>21</sup> Great golden bowl sixteen,  
<sup>22</sup> Great golden bowl seventeen,  
<sup>23</sup> Great golden bowl eighteen,  
<sup>24</sup> Great golden bowl nineteen,  
<sup>25</sup> Great golden bowl twenty,  
<sup>26</sup> Great golden bowl twenty-one,  
<sup>27</sup> Great golden bowl twenty-two,  
<sup>28</sup> Great golden bowl twenty-three,  
<sup>29</sup> Great golden bowl twenty-four,  
<sup>30</sup> Great golden bowl twenty-five.

10

a bcu cha bcu

*Ten Perfect Matches*

'Ten Perfect Matches' is also related to counting and is performed in many different ways. One of the most common ways is by asking, "Can you say *a bcu cha bcu*?" Someone quickly answers while others carefully listen for mispronunciations and other mistakes. It also might be performed by a child saying the first four words of a line (e.g., *a gcig cha gcig*) and another child completing the sentence by saying the remaining words of that line (e.g., *bse ru rwa gcig*). It is also used as a game at drinking parties by, for example, the first person saying the first line, followed by the second person saying the second line, and so on. Furthermore, this tongue twister might be said in reverse, i.e., the first person says line ten, the second person says line nine, and so on. When someone makes a mistake



they are laughed at and punished, e.g., told to drink a cup of liquor.

- <sup>1</sup> a gcig cha gcig bse ru rwa gcig
- <sup>2</sup> a gnyis cha gnyis ra ma nu gnyis
- <sup>3</sup> a gsum cha gsum thab ka 'go gsum
- <sup>4</sup> a bzhi cha bzhi mdzo mo nu bzhi
- <sup>5</sup> a lnga cha lnga mdzub gu spun lnga
- <sup>6</sup> a drug cha drug skar ma smin drug
- <sup>7</sup> a bdun cha bdun skar ma sme bdun
- <sup>8</sup> a brgyad cha brgyad sha bo rwa brgyad
- <sup>9</sup> a dgu cha dgu srin po mgo dgu
- <sup>10</sup> a bcu cha bcu khyi mo nu bcu

- <sup>1</sup> a htək t̥cha htək si rə ra htək
- <sup>2</sup> a ɲi t̥cha ɲi ra ma nə ɲi
- <sup>3</sup> a səm t̥cha səm thab ka mgo səm
- <sup>4</sup> a zə t̥cha zə mdzo mo nə zə
- <sup>5</sup> a ɲa t̥cha ɲa mdzə kə ɸpən ɲa
- <sup>6</sup> a t̥sək t̥cha t̥sək skar ma mən t̥sək
- <sup>7</sup> a dən t̥cha dən skar ma me dən
- <sup>8</sup> a rjed t̥cha rjed ɕa ũ ra rjed
- <sup>9</sup> a gə t̥cha gə sən po mgo gə
- <sup>10</sup> a cə t̥cha cə ɟhə mo nə cə

- <sup>1</sup> Saying one, say of the rhinoceros with one horn,
- <sup>2</sup> Saying two, say of the goat with two teats,
- <sup>3</sup> Saying three, say of the stove that has three legs,
- <sup>4</sup> Saying four, say of the *mdzo mo* that has four teats,
- <sup>5</sup> Saying five, say of the fingers that are five brothers,
- <sup>6</sup> Saying six, say of the Pleiades that has six stars,
- <sup>7</sup> Saying seven, say of *sme bdur*<sup>27</sup> that has seven stars,
- <sup>8</sup> Saying eight, say of the deer with eight-spiked antlers,
- <sup>9</sup> Saying nine, say of the demon with nine heads,
- <sup>10</sup> Saying ten, say of females dogs with ten teats.

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<sup>27</sup> A constellation.

11

a tsha tsha<sup>28</sup>

*Ouch!*

'Ouch!' is performed by two children (Child A and Child B) starting with a pinch on the back of one's hand. Child B pinches Child A's hand. Child A sensitively says, 'Ouch!' expressing pain. Then Child B quickly asks what the matter is and more strongly pinches Child A's hand until Child A answers. When Child A finds a proper answer, his hand is released and his hand goes atop Child B's hand, which he pinches until Child B answers.

<sup>1</sup> A: a tsha tsha

<sup>2</sup> B: ci zig red?

<sup>3</sup> A: tsa ma tsi tog gis so 'debs gi

<sup>4</sup> B: ya ma yang tog gi mgor bud la thongs

<sup>5</sup> khrag chi mo zig yong thal?

<sup>6</sup> A: rdza ma gang yong thal

<sup>7</sup> B: rnag chi mo zig yong thal

<sup>8</sup> A: rnag rdze'u mo gang yong thal

<sup>9</sup> B: khrag snag ga re?

<sup>10</sup> A: khrag rdza ma la rdze'u mo nang na yod

<sup>11</sup> B: rdza ma dang rdze'u mo ga re?

<sup>12</sup> A: rdza ma dang rdze'u mo hob khung nang na yod

<sup>13</sup> B: hob khung ga re?

<sup>14</sup> A: hob khung rtswa yis kha bkab yod

<sup>15</sup> B: rtswa ga re?

<sup>16</sup> A: rtswa mdzo mos zos thal

<sup>17</sup> B: mdzo mo ga re?

<sup>18</sup> A: mdzo mo spyang kis zos thal

<sup>19</sup> B: spyang ki ga re?

<sup>20</sup> A: ...

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<sup>28</sup> *A tsha tsha* expresses sudden, external pain.

<sup>1</sup> A: a tsha tsha

<sup>2</sup> B: tʃhə zəx re

<sup>3</sup> A: tsa ma tsə tok kə so deb kə

<sup>4</sup> B: ja ma jaŋ tok kə go wəd la thoŋ

<sup>5</sup> chək tɕhə mo zəx joŋ tha

<sup>6</sup> A: rdza ma kaŋ joŋ tha

<sup>7</sup> B: nək tɕhə mo zəx joŋ tha

<sup>8</sup> A: nək rdzə mo kaŋ joŋ tha

<sup>9</sup> B: chək nək ka re

<sup>10</sup> A: chək rdza ma la rdzə mo naŋ na jod

<sup>11</sup> B: rdza ma daŋ rdzə mo ka re

<sup>12</sup> A: rdza ma daŋ rdzə mo hob khuŋ naŋ na jod

<sup>13</sup> B: hob khuŋ ka re

<sup>14</sup> A: hob khuŋ rtsa ji kha kab jod

<sup>15</sup> B: rtsa ka re

<sup>16</sup> A: rtsa mdzo mi zi tha

<sup>17</sup> B: mdzo mo ka re

<sup>18</sup> A: mdzo mo htɕaŋ ki zi tha

<sup>19</sup> B: htɕaŋ kə ka re

<sup>20</sup> A: ...

<sup>1</sup> A: Ouch!

<sup>2</sup> B: What's the matter?

<sup>3</sup> A: The *tsa ma tsi tog*<sup>29</sup> bit me.

<sup>4</sup> B: Go atop the *ya ma yang tog*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A nettle.

<sup>30</sup> Blo rtan rdo rje comments, "When I was a child, I often played this game with playmates but never knew the meaning of *ya ma yang tog*. When I asked village elders what *ya ma yang tog* was some said it was a soft, smooth, leafy plant. But no one I talked to had ever seen it or could describe its color, height, or where it grew. *Ya ma yang tog* might carry the same meaning as *ya ma yang 'dug*, which is often heard in Amdo villagers' daily talk meaning 'stay relaxed'. Another possibility is that in the previous line the

<sup>5</sup> How much did it bleed?

<sup>6</sup> A: One big clay-pot-full,

<sup>7</sup> B: How much pus did it emit?

<sup>8</sup> A: One small clay-pot-full.

<sup>9</sup> B: Where are the blood and pus?

<sup>10</sup> A: In the big clay-pot and the small clay-pot.

<sup>11</sup> B: Where are the big and small clay-pots?

<sup>12</sup> A: The big and small clay-pots are in the *hob kung*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>13</sup> B: Where is the *hob kung*?

<sup>14</sup> A: The *hob kung* has been shrouded with hay.

<sup>15</sup> B: Where is the hay?

<sup>16</sup> A: The *mdzo mo* ate it.

<sup>17</sup> B: Where is the *mdzo mo*?

<sup>18</sup> A: A wolf ate the *mdzo mo*.

<sup>19</sup> B: Where is the wolf?

<sup>20</sup> A: ...

12

a mtshar mtshar dgu

*The Nine Wondrous Things*

'The Nine Wondrous Things' describes the natural world—stones, land, water, cliffs, the sky, the moon, grass, broom-plant, and sinkholes—and wonders at certain aspects of these elements, e.g., Why does the sky stay high without anything that lifts it? It may be performed by one person asking another, 'What are the Nine Wondrous Things?'

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thorny plant (*tsha ma tsi tog*) appears and *ya ma yang tog* might have been added, suggesting a soft, smooth plant as a point of contrast."

<sup>31</sup> A cellar or pit used to store mainly potatoes and turnips for winter use. Traditionally, such cellars were inside the home. In 2008, most were outside the home, in the threshing ground.

<sup>1</sup> rdo 'di pha ma med la 'phel no a mtshar  
<sup>2</sup> thang 'di brdal ni med la bde no a mtshar  
<sup>3</sup> chu 'di 'khyid ni med la bzbur no a mtshar  
<sup>4</sup> brag 'di rtsig ni med la 'gyig no a mtshar  
<sup>5</sup> gnam 'di 'gyog ni med la mtho no a mtshar  
<sup>6</sup> gza' 'di 'then ni med la 'gyo no a mtshar  
<sup>7</sup> rtswa 'di 'debs ni med la skyes no a mtshar  
<sup>8</sup> rtsi to kha med la shub sgra gyags no a mtshar  
<sup>9</sup> na khong 'di rko ni med la gting no a mtshar

<sup>1</sup> rdo də pha ma met la phel no a tshar  
<sup>2</sup> thaŋ də rda nə met la de no a tshar  
<sup>3</sup> tʃhə də ʃhə nə met la zər no a tshar  
<sup>4</sup> tʂək də rtsək nə met la ndzək no a tshar  
<sup>5</sup> nam də ndzok nə met la tho no a tshar  
<sup>6</sup> za də then nə met la ndzo no a tshar  
<sup>7</sup> htsa də deb nə met la t̪chi no a tshar  
<sup>8</sup> htsə to kha met la ɕou rja t̪æg no a tshar  
<sup>9</sup> na khung də hko nə met la htaŋ no a tshar

<sup>1</sup> How wondrous stones that increase without any parents,  
<sup>2</sup> How wondrous land that stays flat without anything that  
    levels it,  
<sup>3</sup> How wondrous water that flows without anything that  
    leads it,  
<sup>4</sup> How wondrous cliffs that stay firm without anything that  
    builds them,  
<sup>5</sup> How wondrous the sky that stays high without anything  
    that lifts it,  
<sup>6</sup> How wondrous the moon that moves without anything that  
    pulls it,  
<sup>7</sup> How wondrous grass that grows without anything that  
    plants it,

<sup>8</sup> How wondrous *rtsi to*<sup>32</sup> that rustles without having a mouth,

<sup>9</sup> How wondrous sinkholes<sup>33</sup> that are deep without anything that digs them.

13

a the the brgyad

*The Eight Things Pertaining to One Another*

'The Eight Things Pertaining to One Another' informs that musk deer eat grass, drink water, live in woods on cliffs, produce medicinal materials, have tusks, etc. It may be performed by one person asking another 'What are the eight things pertaining to one another?'

<sup>1</sup> gla rtswa la the

<sup>2</sup> gla chu la the

<sup>3</sup> gla nags la the

<sup>4</sup> gla brag la the

<sup>5</sup> gla rtsi sman la the

<sup>6</sup> gla mchod dung la the

<sup>7</sup> spu mgo nag po nor la the

<sup>8</sup> spu rting dkar po lug la the

<sup>1</sup> yla htse la thi

<sup>2</sup> yla tʃhə la thi

<sup>3</sup> yla nak la thi

<sup>4</sup> yla tʃak la thi

<sup>5</sup> yla htse man la thi

<sup>6</sup> yla tʃhod duŋ la thi

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<sup>32</sup> A plant that might be as much as one meter tall that grows on mountainsides and is used to make brooms.

<sup>33</sup> *Na khong* are found on the grassland and often contain water and grass. Some are deep and livestock may fall inside and drown.

<sup>7</sup> ɸsə mgo nək po nor la thi

<sup>8</sup> ɸsə htaŋ ɣkar po ləx la thi

<sup>1</sup> Musk deer are related to grass,

<sup>2</sup> Musk deer are related to water,

<sup>3</sup> Musk deer are related to woods,

<sup>4</sup> Musk deer are related to cliffs,

<sup>5</sup> Musk is related to medicine,

<sup>6</sup> Musk deer tusks are related to conch,

<sup>7</sup> (Musk) black-hair tips are related to yaks,

<sup>8</sup> (Musk) white-hair bases are related to sheep.

14

med la med dgu

*The Nine Non-existences*

'The Nine Non-existences' teach children about things that they take for granted, such as the people, animals, and birds that surround them. By learning such tongue twisters, children gain a deeper understanding of the numerous living beings that inhabit this natural world. While repeating this tongue twister, children are led to wonder about the origin of people and the nature of surrounding animals by raising questions using 'Why?', 'When?', and 'What?', e.g., 'Why do people not have tails?' To such a question, old people try to find an answer either from folktales or from their own knowledge about the world.

<sup>1</sup> mgo nag myi la rnga ma med

<sup>2</sup> no ho<sup>34</sup> khyi la phyi rting med

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<sup>34</sup> When Blo rtan rdo rje asked Mgon po rgya mtsho, "What does *no ho* mean?" the latter replied, "It is a Mongolian word probably meaning black." Juha Janhunen writes: This information involves confusion between three words: the Mongolian words for 'green' and 'dog', and the Tibetan word

<sup>3</sup> g.yang dkar lug la bkal 'gel med  
<sup>4</sup> tsi gu ra ma mgo 'dzin med  
<sup>5</sup> nam mkha'i bya la glo ba med  
<sup>6</sup> ri bong gnyid log 'a mtsher ra med  
<sup>7</sup> skya ga khra mor mkhal ma med  
<sup>8</sup> 'do rigs rta bor rva co med  
<sup>9</sup> thod dkar 'bri mor ya so med

<sup>1</sup> mgo nax n̥ə la ŋa ma met  
<sup>2</sup> no ho ʃhə la ɕə htaŋ met  
<sup>3</sup> jaŋ ɣkar ləx la kal gal met  
<sup>4</sup> tsə kə ra ma mgo zən met  
<sup>5</sup> nam khi ɕʌ la ɣlo wa met  
<sup>6</sup> rə ɣəŋ n̥ə lok a sher ra met  
<sup>7</sup> ca ka cha mor kha ma met  
<sup>8</sup> do rəg hta wor ra t̥əo met  
<sup>9</sup> thod ɣkar nd̥ʒə mor ja so met

<sup>1</sup> Black-headed<sup>35</sup> people lack tails,  
<sup>2</sup> Black dogs<sup>36</sup> lack heels,  
<sup>3</sup> Fine sheep don't carry packs,

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for 'black'. The word actually occurring in the tongue twister is likely to be Mongol *noqai* > *nohoi* 'dog', Oirat *nohoo*, phonemically /noho/. Not knowing this, the informant identified the word with the Mongol item for 'green', *nogoo/n*, but again, not remembering the correct meaning of the latter, he assumed it to mean the same as the somewhat similar sounding Tibetan word *nag pa* 'black'. The original idea of the tongue twister seems to juxtapose the Mongol and Tibetan words for 'dog', yielding *noho* + *khyi* 'doggy-dog'. It may be a question of simply playing with synonymous words from two languages, though the implication may also be 'Mongolian dogs'.

<sup>35</sup> Tibetans describe humans as 'black-headed beings'.

<sup>36</sup> Dogs are usually black in this area.



- <sup>4</sup> Mice and goats lack masters,  
<sup>5</sup> Birds of the sky lack lungs,  
<sup>6</sup> Sleepy rabbits lack spleens,  
<sup>7</sup> Pretty magpies lack kidneys.  
<sup>8</sup> Fine horses lack horns,  
<sup>9</sup> White-foreheaded 'bri<sup>37</sup> lack upper teeth.

15

chags la chags dgu  
*The Nine Appearances*

'The Nine Appearances' depicts a vivid world and teaches about the formation of the earth, and then gives a clear picture of a man with an ornamented hat riding a saddled horse.

- <sup>1</sup> sa thog la chu chags  
<sup>2</sup> chu thog la dar chags  
<sup>3</sup> dar thog la rdo chags  
<sup>4</sup> rdo thog la rta chags  
<sup>5</sup> rta thog la sga chags  
<sup>6</sup> sga thog la a 'jog chags  
<sup>7</sup> a 'jog thog la myi chags  
<sup>8</sup> myi thog la zhwa chags  
<sup>9</sup> zhwa thog la tog chags

- <sup>1</sup> sha thok la t̥hə t̥həg  
<sup>2</sup> t̥hə thok la dar t̥həg  
<sup>3</sup> dar thok la rdo t̥həg  
<sup>4</sup> rdo thok la hta t̥həg  
<sup>5</sup> hta thok la ga t̥həg  
<sup>6</sup> ga thok la a ndzok t̥həg  
<sup>7</sup> a ndzok thok la ɲə t̥həg  
<sup>8</sup> ɲə thok la ɕa t̥həg

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<sup>37</sup> A female yak.

<sup>9</sup> ɛa thok la tok tɕhəg

<sup>1</sup> Water appeared on earth,

<sup>2</sup> Ice appeared on water,

<sup>3</sup> Rocks appeared on ice,

<sup>4</sup> Horses appeared on rocks,

<sup>5</sup> Saddles appeared on horses,

<sup>6</sup> *a 'jog*<sup>38</sup> appeared on saddles,

<sup>7</sup> People appeared on *a 'jog*,

<sup>8</sup> Hats appeared on men,

<sup>9</sup> Ornaments appeared on hats.

## CONCLUSION

Formerly, in the course of 'Family' (*khyim tshang*)—a favorite game amongst Tibetan children in the countryside—participants dug caves that they labeled 'homes', and then acted out the roles of families based on folklore they were familiar with, such as a king's family or the Tibetan trickster, Uncle Dunba (A khu Ston pa). When they met in their caves, they first tried to come up with an appropriate folktale to model their play on, and then began to struggle for roles of higher position, such as that of king. The adept performance of tongue twisters was a key to acquiring a higher position. The children challenged each other to say such tongue twisters as those given in this paper quickly in a short, given time without mispronunciations, sentence or word disorder, and word omissions. Higher positions were assigned accordingly.

In the past, children in Pha bzhi were sent into the mountains to live with their grandparents who herded with other elders. Customarily, grandparents taught their grandchildren what their own grandparents had taught them.

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<sup>38</sup> The saddle's seat.

This was an environment in which grandparents transmitted their knowledge of songs, folklore, and language through colorful speech that was intimately associated with the natural environment.

Times change. In 2008, nearly all children were sent to school at around the age of seven, where they were taught in literary Tibetan and Chinese. When schooling began, they were heavily burdened with school activities and no longer lived with their grandparents in the mountains. Instead, they lived with them at home, but school activities, homework, and the availability and popularity of television and VCD/ DVD programs meant that their contact with their grandparents was far less intimate than was the case with the previous generation. In 2008, tongue twisters, once an important aspect of Tibetan traditions, had almost vanished in Pha bzhi.

When no one listens, no one tells, and when no one tells, no one remembers.

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<sup>39</sup> Pe cin = Beijing 北京.

<sup>40</sup> Lan grub = Lanzhou 兰州.